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Statement of purpose

Taking stock of the universe of positions and goals that constitutes leftist politics today, we are left with the disquieting suspicion that a deep commonality underlies the apparent variety: What exists today is built upon the desiccated remains of what was once possible.

In order to make sense of the present, we find it necessary to disentangle the vast accumulation of positions on the Left and to evaluate their saliency for the possible reconstitution of emancipatory politics in the present. Doing this implies a reconsideration of what is meant by the Left.

Our task begins from what we see as the general disenchantment with the present state of progressive politics. We feel that this disenchantment cannot be cast off by sheer will, by simply "carrying on the fight," but must be addressed and itself made an object of critique. Thus we begin with what immediately confronts us.

The *Platypus Review* is motivated by its sense that the Left is disoriented. We seek to be a forum among a variety of tendencies and approaches on the Left—not out of a concern with inclusion for its own sake, but rather to provoke disagreement and to open shared goals as sites of contestation. In this way, the recriminations and accusations arising from political disputes of the past may be harnessed to the project of clarifying the object of leftist critique.

The *Platypus Review* hopes to create and sustain a space for interrogating and clarifying positions and orientations currently represented on the Left, a space in which questions may be raised and discussions pursued that would not otherwise take place. As long as submissions exhibit a genuine commitment to this project, all kinds of content will be considered for publication.

Submission guidelines
Articles will typically range in length from 750–4,500 words, but longer pieces will be considered. Please send article submissions and inquiries about this project to: *review_editor@platypus1917.org.* All submissions should conform to the *Chicago Manual of Style*.

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The Platypus Review

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Beyond sect or movement

What is a political center?

Michael Hirsch, Jim Creegan, Spencer Leonard

The following is an edited transcript of a panel that took place at the Left Forum in New York City on June 30, 2019. The panelists were asked to respond to the following description:

In his 1973 essay, "Anatomy of the Micro-Sect," Hal Draper defines a party as opposed to a "movement" or the "sects" that dominated the Left of his time:

A sect presents itself as the embodiment of the socialist movement, though it is a membership organization whose boundary is set more or less rigidly by the points in its political program rather than by its relation to the social struggle. In contrast, a working-class party is not simply an electoral organization but rather, whether electorally engaged or not, an organization which really is the political arm of decisive sectors of the working class, which politically reflects (or refracts) the working class in motion as it is. A "socialist movement" sums up the mass manifestations of a socialist working class in various fields, not only the political, usually around a mass socialist party.[1]

Against both sect formation and movement building, Draper argues for the formation of a "political center," which would be different from a unification of sects, as a first step towards the goal of building a socialist party. How is our present moment similar to or different from Draper's? What is a socialist party and what are the greatest obstacles today to its realization and how can those obstacles be met? Hal Draper was deeply influenced by his study of Marx and Marxism when he wrote this essay. What can we learn from Hal Draper's Marxism today?

Michael Hirsch: To my mind, Hal Draper's "Anatomy of the Micro-Sect" would better be called "Remarks on Sectarianism by a Recovering Sect Addict." Draper was a veteran of innumerable tendency wars. Not only were his principles carved in stone, he used them as rhetorical cudgels, too.

My remarks today are not meant to challenge those principles, foundational and resolute as they may be, only to question their application in the essay under discussion. Draper's well-articulated beliefs — in socialism from below, the self-emancipation of the working class (accept no substitutes!), and the need for an activist, authentically mass-based political party independent of, and in contention with, bourgeois parties — are my political guideposts as well. It is the implementation of the third that is the historical sticking point.

Given how right Draper has been about so many things, not least of which is documenting the self-activity of working people worldwide, it may sound churlish to criticize him. But as Marx wrote, "the task confronting us at present [is] the *ruthless criticism of the existing order,* ruthless in that it will shrink neither from its own discoveries, nor from conflict with the powers that be."[2] As good a seer as was Draper, he can be fairly challenged.

Take for example his defense of Lenin and the mass character of the first and second Russian Revolutions. They are fine as far as they go, but much of the Russian success was *sui generis*. The collapsing Tzarist empire was brought down in large measure by defeat in a punishing world war. This occurring in a largely agrarian country whose inheritors were faced with creating an egalitarian society amid the wreckage, or die trying. It was an impossible task, especially when no help came in war, largely on the basis that trade union leaders and party officials had more to lose from opposing war than gain from heralding it.[3] The union tops and the party apparatchiks who backed their own governments' war efforts were not simply or primarily gutless, but bureaucratically minded. They had something tangible to lose in the way of careers from opposing their nations' imperial war aims. It was less an example of Schumpeter's dictum about "hold[ing] out the promise of immediate benefits"[4] and more about fearing the consequences of losing their stakes by bucking the system. The same was true of the trade union leaders in Britain who called off the General Strike of 1926 and sold out the still-striking miners. When confronted with a revolutionary situation, they did not so much choke as follow their short-term vested interests in caving to their Tory masters.

Draper would agree to this analysis — in fact, I accreted much of it from him and his circle — but he is silent in the essay under review on what sort of movement could challenge and reverse that self-interested bureaucratic renegacy. Not a Leninist Party, he asserts. Certainly not a micro-sect pretending to be a small mass party. And he would be right. But if not that, if not a centralized party, then what? Certainly not Keynesian-style reforms, best exemplified by the countercyclical planning of the French Popular Front and its efforts to increase wages, shorten the workweek, create public works to cut unemployment and increase consumer demand. These efforts were far more extensive than those of FDR's New Deal but were soon undone by French bourgeois opposition and replaced by a center-right government that imposed harsh "prudent" finance policies, a cover for austerity and ruling class theft. So much for Leon Blum's oft-quoted eschewal of the conquest of power in preference to the exercise of power. The Popular Front leader and, briefly, French head-of-state in effect got neither.

Yet with Draper's "no sectarians need apply" credo, would he, if still among us, bend the stick just a bit to acknowledge that support for Bernie Sanders in the eight-month run-up to Super Tuesday is not a fatal flaw. In truth, though I wear a Labor for Bernie button and talk him up, I am hardly sold on the Bernie venture. But I will not condemn it. It is a tactical shift that needs exploring, at least.

But my larger point is this: Whatever is wrong with what passes on the American Left for a Leninist party, those varied groups are right to recognize that the victories of fascism in Spain in 1938 and Chile in the 1970s were the outcomes of the Left's challenges to capitalism that were fatally flawed because they did not nurture a political party that aimed not just at governing, but at reigning, that is to say "exercising power." That was clearly not the Spanish Communists' goal under the Popular Front. The Workers' Party of Marxist Unification (POUM) was too small and too underfunded to offer much long-term resistance, as Orwell for one testifies. The anarchists in Catalonia were isolated and outgunned. Allende's Socialist Party in Chile was not aimed at a social revolution either, let alone an insurrection, though it clearly threatened U.S. investments, which was danger enough for Henry Kissinger and the CIA. Allende, like generations of European reformist socialists, thought he could beat the governing classes at their own game. He paid with his life, as did thousands of others.

Draper is right that a revolutionary party cannot be hothoused. It cannot be simply invoked. It must be based on facts on the ground, of course. But it cannot be wished away, either, or treated like a contagion, or simply denigrated as Draper does in this essay. Leninists are comrades, too.

A little biography here. I was never a member of the recently suicided International Socialist Organization (ISO), nor was I ever interested in joining them — too many subterranean intrigues, too many principles that served more as prayer wheels than as actual guides to action, too many excuses for electoral abstentions, even the few that had merit, especially when taken under the label of the Democratic Party.

Instead, I joined DSA sixteen years ago, knowing all its faults — its one-dimensional electoral enchantments, its careerist fascinations, its longtime avoidance of trade union struggles except when aligned with a few labor tops as footstools. It is at best a default position.

Draper left the IS in 1972, over an issue that at the time seemed nitpicky. He thought we were ultra-left on the trade union question and we may have been, for six months. We were one of the first groups to talk about taking a deep dive into industrial work. We learned from Draper that a rank-and-file strategy, building militancy on the shop floor, was the basis for building socialism in America. *Not* to run candidates for office, but to have a deep and wide influence among the rank-and-file, which we felt was ill-used by a bureaucratic trade union leadership. In our ultra-left phase, we took the line that many of the unions were useless and that we would organize "struggle groups" against the unions. That was heresy for Draper and he left. The criticism I had at the time and still have today is that he may have left the sect, but then he became a sect of one person. One of the jokes we used to have was, "Did you hear what happened? Hal split from Draper!" If you think sectarianism is a danger, the problem is that the people who leave the sects stay sectarian. Their principles then become not a means for encouraging others to work better, but of differentiating themselves from others. If you come to events today at the Left Forum, you will see Trotskyist sects preaching not a better way for us to work together, but *their* way. As though truth resides in a formulation!

The debates we used to have on the Left were about two things: 1) the class nature of the Democratic Party and 2) the class nature of the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union did the American Left a great service by collapsing, because when it collapsed we did not have *that* problem anymore! On the other hand, we did still have to define the class nature of our own fights.

Draper did two things once he left the sect that he so precipitously avoided. One was to become a first-rate Marxist intellectual writing for a magazine, the *Monthly Review*. He wrote a five-volume study of the writings of Marx, which is among the best ever written in any language. If you haven't read Draper on Marx, you are missing something. But "Anatomy of the Micro-Sect" is so diffuse that it cannot answer basic questions: What the hell should people do? What is the direction? The problem with the Spartacist League, for example, has always been that their political line was seen as refreshing and revolutionary in a way that had no bearing on their ability to intervene anywhere. I once read a major essay of theirs that took up an entire issue of their magazine. It was an attack on Ernest Mandel for opportunism here, here, here, and here. You finish the article and you say, "You know, Mandel took a lot of shortcuts. Perhaps he shouldn't have, but the bottom line is that he built something that intervenes in the class. You guys haven't built anything that intervenes in the class. If you can't build a movement, shut the fuck up!"

Jim Creegan: I want to speak to my own fifteen-year experience in groups that can be very accurately described as sects. I belonged to the Spartacist League

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for five years, from about 1981 to 1986. During that time, despite the heavily political, sectarian presence of the Spartacist League at public events, it was a personality cult around its founder-leader, James Robertson, who just died recently. After that, I spent the next ten years in one of the derivative products of the Spartacist League called the International Bolshevik Tendency (IBT), which was not a cult, but was almost a pure example of a sect. And what do I mean by that? It was dedicated to carrying out something that it considered to be an eternally valid Trotskyist program, dating from the 1917 revolution and more recently from the *Transitional Program* of 1938. They believed that the program remained valid regardless of what happened in the world. They had no clue in terms of analyzing newer developments in the class struggle and in politics. Now the IBT, which was fewer than twenty members, has the rare distinction among Trotskyist groupments that they managed to split over the Russian question thirty years *after* the collapse of the Soviet Union!

After I left this group twenty years ago, I pondered, What was it that led to every sectarian group's pathology? This fate — degeneration and eventually failure — befell not only the Spartacist League, but the Healyite Workers League, the Workers' World Party, and so many others, most recently the ISO. So, it happened not just to my group, but to most of the small revolutionary groups. I had a blinding flash of insight which I do not think has occurred to any of the members of these groups: It may not that their theory and practice is wrong, accounts for their failure, but rather something in the objective situation they all faced. First of all, postwar capitalism, though they did not realize it, was different in fundamental ways from the crisis-prone capitalism of the interwar years. There was a boom that the French called "trente glorieuses," that is, the thirty years following World War II in which standards of living of many key sections of the working class, though not all, improved steadily. The organizations that tried to carry out a revolutionary program could not find a mass base in the working class, and, in the Trotskyist tradition which I belong to, *that* is the criterion of failure or success. Simply because of the relatively prosperous conditions that most workers, especially unionized workers, had, they were not interested in revolution during those years.

When the post-war prosperity began to wane in the 1970s, it was followed by a vicious capitalist attack on all fronts for which the workers' movement and the socialist movement were completely unprepared. This included attacks on unions and wage levels. Internationally, it culminated in the downfall of the Soviet Union. I disagree with Michael on this: I do not think that was a positive development, but rather it set the workers' and socialist movements back at least two decades. In this situation — socialism discredited, with those elements of the working class that believed in it now ceasing to, and leftists moving consistently to the right — there was very little chance of a working-class revival, a socialist revival.

Draper's notion of a "political center" has much validity, but unfortunately it was advanced precisely at the time when the neoliberal offensive was beginning. So, the strategy he proposed of trying to found new organizations where you are, where you work, and then have that cohere into a political center, was foredoomed in 1973 when he wrote "Anatomy of a Micro-Sect." That said, if you look at the history of the workers' movement, you will find a strong validation of the points that he makes. The main counter-example has always been considered the Leninist party. The party that Lenin founded was supposedly strongly programmatically pitched. But if you study the actual history of Russian Social Democracy, you will find that, in tendencies at least, the Bolsheviks do not arise when Lenin and his collaborators said: "We've drawn up a program, go down on your knees before it." In reality, when Lenin came out of Siberian exile shortly before 1900 and went into exile in Western Europe, he put into practice a scheme that had entered his mind in Siberia. That was to found a newspaper. *Iskra* it was called. The Russian Social Democratic Labor Party did have a congress in 1898 in Minsk, but there were only nine people in attendance seven of whom were arrested immediately after the congress. So, it was kind of a non-event. But Lenin did establish this newspaper, which was smuggled in and out of Russia. Around *Iskra* emerged a network of correspondents, smugglers, and people who with skills like using invisible ink.

Iskra did two things: First of all, it was based on study circles and the rising worker's movement. Lenin did not create those things, but, because of Tsarist repression, these movements were highly localized. It was very difficult for them to gain any sense of themselves as a national movement or party. But when *Iskra* came out, events all over Russia were reported giving the movement, for the first time, a sense of national coherence. In addition, the organization that developed around the newspaper gave Lenin the foundation of a new political party, which announced its triumph at the second national congress (which is really the founding congress) in 1903, when the split between the Bolshevik and Menshevik factions took place.

Today capitalism's neoliberal *fixe* is coming to an end. Also, we have today something that can be called a movement, which came into being in the wake of the Sanders campaign, though it had precursors in #Occupy, in the union rebellion in Wisconsin, and in the teacher's strikes that have taken place around the country. This movement has activated a lot of people and the center of that movement, which can be described as having its own political center in Draper's sense, is the DSA and the publication closely associated with it, *Jacobin*. This is a positive development. After all, we have wandered for a long time in the desert. But we have to clarify the politics of this new movement and this political center. For, despite the revolutionary phraseology — the talk about a clean break with the Democratic Party, class struggle, social democracy, etc. — it is decidedly reformist. Despite all the talk about strategy, the main thing that the DSA does right now is to vote and to canvas for the various left-leaning Democrats, whose program is, first of all, almost exclusively electoral. They want to reconstitute the New Deal, but it is impossible at this point to reconstitute the New Deal or to remake the country through a set of gradual reforms. Still, we cannot ignore this movement or the changes that have taken place in the Democratic Party. Read today's *New York Times* if you have any doubts. There is a headline about how alarmed the centrists in the Democratic Party have become by the recent debates.[5] But the question for revolutionary Marxists is how to intersect this movement. After all, thousands and thousands of people are forming into it in all parts of the country. But how to intersect it, move it in a left-wing direction, and dispel the reformist illusions that are so widespread within it?

Spencer Leonard: In his recently published *Socialist Manifesto*, *Jacobin* editor Bhaskar Sunkara defends extending the "gains of reform" achieved in the twentieth century.[6] But the twentieth century, when these supposed gains were won, was a period of counter-revolution, one in which the prospect for the achievement of socialism — socialism instead of capitalism, but also socialism beyond capitalism, achieved on the basis of capitalism — receded beyond view. By the notion of the "gains of reform" Sunkara can only mean policies of the capitalist state, as in the twentieth century the labor movement has disorganized and socialism as an independent politics collapsed. Certainly, none can claim today what was widely acknowledged by friend and foe alike a century ago, that the future belongs to socialism. We may argue that socialism is necessary, desirable, even possible, but not likely in the sense this was felt, even assumed, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Hal Draper was young enough to feel the failure of socialism, the failure of Marxism. He lived the interminable crisis-unto-death of Marxism, but was too old to take it for granted, to forcibly suppress that awareness, as did the generation that followed him.

Giving his life and intellect over to the practical struggle for socialism in the 30s, 40s, 50s, and 60s, Draper eventually dropped out of organized leftist politics to devote the final two decades of his life to answering the questions, "Who was Marx?" and "What was Marxism?" Could the historical experience stretching from the French Revolution to the Russian Revolution — at the center of which sits Marx in 1848 — somehow be repeated (only, this time, with greater historical consciousness and thus brought to resolution)? Could the history of the world-historic struggle for socialism be brought to bear upon the present? Could the task that humanity set itself be completed? Or was the twentieth century process of historical regression and social disintegration inexorable? In the last decades of his life, Draper raises the questions that Sunkara seeks to displace, the reality (in and through "gains") of the interminable defeat of socialism. Draper thus negatively raises the possibility of capitalism's destruction/realization through the mastery of its negative historical dialectic.

Throughout the history of Marxism, even before its death agony, returning to Marx has been central to overcoming internal crises. The history of Marxism is punctuated by attempts at recovering and reasserting Marx's Marxism in the face of Marxism's crisis, political liquidation that converts socialism into just another bonapartism. The answer to the crisis and failure of Marxism has always been, is necessarily, the reassertion of revolutionary Marxism, whether against Bernstein and the revisionism of the SPD, against Kautsky's renegacy, against the Mensheviks (and the waverers amongst the Bolsheviks themselves), or against Stalinism, which transformed Marxism into the organizer of defeat. In the period of the New Left, there was an attempt, the last significant one, to recover Marx and Marxism. Central to that attempted recovery, Hal Draper, who was one of a handful of serious intellectuals dedicated to recovering Marx's Marxism in the second half of the twentieth century. Crucially, he privileged the intellectual working through of the Marxist legacy over joining in the 1970s the second and final phase of the New Left, the route taken by many of the youth which he inspired and trained.

Today, the endless spate of *Historical Materialism*, *Verso*, and academic press publications on Marx's so-called "social theory" typically do not so much as touch upon the question of Marx's core project of politically mastering democracy to achieve proletarian socialism. So, the student today is still well advised to digest Draper's five volumes on the subject, and that work circles around "democracy" as a kind of psychic wound. Attempting to vindicate or further elucidate his theory of "socialism from below," Draper deliberately attempts to clear from Marx's Marxism the distortions imposed by the historical experience of twentieth century counter-revolution — by Social Democracy, by Communism, and, ultimately, by the New Left's failure to overcome the mid-century crisis of both. The effort is heroic. And, if there still be a young person capable of mistrusting the affirmative history on offer in Sunkara's *Socialist Manifesto*, Draper can help them to read Marx against the grain. But Draper is not of much help in the way millennials are trying to use him, as a guide or a map to the present.

In 1970, following more or less immediately upon the establishment of the International Socialists, Hal Draper and a handful of others attempted to strangle it in its cradle. Calling themselves the "Reorient tendency," they tried to convince the fledgling IS to abandon the path of what Draper termed "the sect," arguing that "the sect form of American socialist groupment" is not only a dead bend but "a roadblock."

Because in the end Draper and his circle simply "[resigned] from the IS with the least possible fuss" [Open Letter to the I.S.], none of these documents were published at the time. In recent years two "Toward a New Beginning — On Another Road: The Alternative to the Micro-Sect" (1971) and "Anatomy of the Micro-Sect" (1973) have appeared on marxists.org, where they have met with an unlikely fascination from young people. Most important among the Reorient Papers yet to appear are Draper's "Turning Point: The Nature of the Crisis in the I.S." and Ernie Haberkern's "Sectarianism or Marxism: A Review of Issues in Dispute," both from 1970.[7] But even as these documents circulated within the I.S., Draper was prosecuting his argument in another mode, as an argument about the history of the left.

Bound together with every copy of the Reorient Papers in the Hal Draper archives is an announcement for a lecture series delivered by Hal and his wife Anne in the autumn of 1970 on the subject of "Socialism and the Labor Movement." This likely resulted the series "Marxism and the Trade Unions" now available online. The final sheet in the bound collection announces another lecture series, this one on "Revolution and Revolutionary Organization: 1789, 1848, 1871, and 1905," of which to my knowledge no published version exists. In addition to lecturing, Draper in these years intensified his writing on Marx, publishing "Marx and Engels on Women's Liberation" and "The Death of the State in Marx and Engels" in 1970, "The Principle of Self-Emancipation in Marx and Engels" in 1971, "The Concept of the Lumpenproletariat in Marx and Engels" in 1972, and "Marx on Democratic Forms of Government" in 1974. The thinking that went into Draper's five-volume *Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution*, the first volume of which appeared in 1977, was rooted in the same experience that led to his departure from the IS.

With the partial exception of "Micro-Sect," all of the Reorient documents argue for the industrialization of cadre and for a rank-and-file long-term strategy for building socialism in a "non-pre-revolutionary" period. And it is important to register that Draper took 1969–73 to be a "non-pre-revolutionary" period, despite its coming on the heels of the sixties and despite the growing militancy associated with the new unionism of the early 1970s, the period in which he was writing.

According to Draper's strategic perspective, some (former) cadre, in the short run at least, should take union jobs and help lead the workers' struggle from within their unions. Others more intellectually inclined would form a "political center." They would undertake a publishing program that was to begin with books and pamphlets. These were to grow out of the experience of Third Camp Trotskyism reaching back to Bolshevism itself, while, of course, attempting to centralize the experience of the working class.

After 1968, the sixties were over for Draper. At that time, he noted that "when new opportunities unfolded, a good part of what considers itself the New Left either was 'co-opted or else copped out,' whether by turning to the Democrats or "[blustering] about 'destroying America,' 'urban guerrilla-ism,' and other manifestations of the Politics of Impotence." Still, im the immediate wake of '68 Draper was arguing for the building of a sect or, put more neutrally, a membership organization. At all events, the fruits of the New Left student movement, however meagre, were to be harvested:

> What we need to transform America in the long run are serious revolutionists, with a long-term commitment and perspective. That excludes the court jesters. . . It also excludes the types who get all ready to cop out as soon as they turn thirty, after which they will be able to explain indulgently to their sons (who will show their rebellion by being clean-shaven) that they too were radicals when they were young and irresponsible. . . Being a serious revolutionist means, to begin with, training yourself in a Marxist understanding of society and as a militant in the mass struggles of our day. . . The more serious revolutionists we can produce, the easier it will be also to build a broad independent radical movement/party: for you cannot do this without a vanguard. [Hal Draper, "The Co-Opted" *The Activist* 22 (Fall 1968), 3-4]

This seems to suggest the founding of a sect. But, by the time he wrote "Micro-Sect," Draper was arguing that the only connection between the socialists in the labor movement and those attempting to establish a political center would be that the former will look to the latter for ideological sustenance by purchasing and/or subscribing to its publications. These, for their part, were to help generalize their experience beyond their particular sectors, unions, and local circumstances. The political center would evolve alongside the growing mobilization of labor to the point that socialists within the labor movement would report in and to a center publication on developments within their unions and industries as well as upon wider democratic struggles. The intermediate goal was the creation, on the basis of a mobilizing labor movement, of a workers' politics, a (presumably) multi-tendency, i.e. multi-"centered," socialist political party. In this sense, Draper re-envisioned a replay not of the twentieth-century struggle for socialism, but of the history of Marx and Marxism from 1848 to 1917, especially of the pre-party period of Russian Marxism, i.e. from the Emancipation of Labor Group in 1883 to the so-called 2nd party congress in 1903. Jim has already alluded to this. The lesson of the twentieth century was that there was no lesson to be drawn from it, except the wrong ones — "roadblocks".

Responses

MH: It is tough to criticize Draper. First of all, he is not alive anymore. Secondly, so much of his work is worthwhile that I feel like an ungrateful child in taking him on.

When Draper left the IS he did not do what he said he wanted to do. The movement he wanted never developed. Those centers never cohered. The publishing house that he and Ernie Haberkern established chiefly reprinted older tracts. In terms of a strategy, he didn't really have one. And there were others who didn't leave the IS in that transition. One was Stan Weir. Stan was a longshoreman in California for much of his life. He was a model for those of us who industrialized in the 70s. He was also the model for Harvey Swados's 1970 novel *Standing Fast*. Stan was someone from that generation of the forties who remained militant despite the difficulty of that in the fifties during the height of the Cold War. Another veteran of the old Schamanites who didn't move right was Herman Benson who formed the Association of Union Democracy. They offered legal support to insurgents in the labor movement. These to my mind are heroes in a way that Draper never was. Herman was a friend of the IS and Stan Weir was in it. They didn't give up on party building, but they also didn't fetishize it. Whether Draper should have done this or that is impossible to argue. But the piece that we are discussing is terribly short-sighted.

The economy that was able to buttress reformism in the trade union movement is gone. Whether it's Trump or Bernie Sanders, there is no ability to win the kind of concessions from the ruling class such as were gained in the past. That period is over. What is possible is another question.

JC: I don't know if the answers to the present lie in the past. But I still urge the study of Marxism as a rich vein of revolutionary experience. By going back to original sources, as I have over the years, you realize that the versions of this history taught in various organizations are not completely true. You find ideas that you never knew existed, that can be recovered. It is not necessary to throw out the revolutionary past in order to deal with the present.

Michael identified the dilemma we face. We are being drawn into reformist enthusiasm, enthusiasm for resurrecting the New Deal. But that has no future due to the objective conditions. There is an enthusiasm, but the crisis of capital is not profound. The ruling classes are arrogant and unwilling to negotiate. So the question is, What happens when the reformist hopes raised by this new wave are disappointed as they are sure to be? We have seen examples, like Greece, where they elected a party with an electoral strategy and that failed. The wave of popular enthusiasm that led to electoral support faded quickly and turned into disillusionment. We may see something very similar when Sander's fails to get the nomination, or Warren for that matter. Hopes will be dashed and people will feel demoralized. Without dismissing the movement that has arisen, one must point out its limitations and the questions they present. We have a society that is largely deindustrialized. So, the old strategy of going into the unions**,** of planting yourself in factories, does not have the objective basis it had in the 50s and 60s. So how do you mobilize the people outside of elections? What is the ground game of the left?

SL: Michael mentioned the issue of the conservatism of trade unionism, the counter-revolutionary or at least the Bonapartist tendencies emerging form within socialist politics and, specifically, from trade union bureaucrats (as most dramatically exemplified by the crisis of the German SPD). This is a question that Draper avoids. For instance, when he talks about Lenin, he prefers to speak of the Lenin of *What Is To Be Done?*, the orthodox "Kautskyan" Lenin. The question of the operation of imperialism and its effects within socialist politics — the generation of petty bourgeois tendencies within socialist politics, the question of the labor lieutenants of capital leading socialist politics — are questions that Draper is chary of because of his Shachtmanite Stalinophobia. Thus, in *Socialism from Below*, which remained a touchstone of the IS tendency to the end, Draper diagnoses Stalinism as anti-democratic. He sees workers' democracy as the basis and goal of Marxism. Draper ignores Marx's and Marxism's critique of democracy, that in a fundamental sense it is rooted in petty-bourgeois discontents and serves as the political basis of capitalism. Draper thinks that workers' politics carried through to the end will result in the emergence of the labor party that would have a majority that could simply be elected into power and institute the dictatorship of the proletariat. His Stalinophobia drives him to that.

The challenge I want to put to the other panelists is, what really could have been done in the 1970s? I am unwilling to say that the objective conditions of the 1970s rendered politics moot. If socialist politics depends upon material deprivation, we could be waiting a very long time for socialism. This period of neoliberalism has after all been a massive engine of wealth creation lifting hundreds of millions of people out of poverty in China, India, and Africa. The starving families we saw on television when I was a child, and certainly you would have been familiar with in the middle of the twentieth century, are largely confined to remote war zones today. Capitalist productivity generates a certain material wealth. But there remains the question of unfreedom, of the incapacity to participate in society, of massive unemployment, etc. Social disintegration is the issue. I am not taking Draper's side versus anybody else's side in the disputes of the 1970s, but I do not think that the question of objective conditions gets to the heart of the crisis that was faced with the collapse of the New Left after 1968.

Q&A

Behind this conversation seems to lie the question of the earlier twentieth century — Stalinism and Trotsky's opposition to it. If all of these micro-sect projects failed because of objective conditions, then what about Trotsky's project itself? Was that also essentially useless? From what point? From the Fourth International, from earlier in 1933, or from the Left Opposition? In other words, were there ever objective conditions that allowed Trotsky's project to make sense, or was there already a delusion.

Another comment is with respect to the 1890s to the 1920s and the Soviet Union. There are several things about the Bolshevik Revolution that are unusual and perhaps unique. You have not only a Leninist Party, not only the Bolsheviks, but Lenin. The Bolsheviks on their own without Lenin's leadership would probably have not taken power. Almost certainly not. But you also have the phenomena of the Soviets. In Cuba, China, in Eastern Europe, etc. you didn't have those that the party could interact with. And another point which often gets elided is that in the period of Soviet power you have the ease with which the Bolsheviks took power in 1917 and the triumphal march of Soviet power through the middle of 1918. Beyond that, the endurance of the Soviet Union is actually based to a large extent on a military struggle.

JC: People in Trotskyist sects talk as if they are rebuilding the Fourth International. But it was never really built in the first place. It was still-born. That said, facing the conditions that Trotsky did in the 1930s, I do not know what else a revolutionary could have done. Capitalism was still in profound crisis. Of course, Trotsky felt that that was the final crisis of capitalism. He was more entrenched in the twenties. And there were the revolutionary uprisings of 1923 and there were subsequent revolutionary opportunities. The last big one was Spain. So, try as he might to overcome what he called the crisis of leadership in order to establish a party to carry out the necessary tasks to make revolution, he was wrong. Capitalism was not on its last legs. It was not in its death agony. It revived in the post-war period to enjoy its biggest period of expansion. That was an objective condition that rendered revolutionary politics very difficult. While I agree that material prosperity does not make revolution impossible, we have to understand the experience of generations who had known only war and depression coming in the mid-twentieth century to experience continual, incremental improvements in their lives. If people see such incremental improvements as a real prospect, they are not going to be inclined to join a revolutionary party. Revolution is hard. It makes heavy demands. The gamble of the Russian Revolution was made in the belief that it was the final crisis of capitalism, that capitalist productive forces had reached their outer limits, that there would be either a proletarian revolution or a general decline of society. That was Trotsky's view, too. It turned out to be wrong.

MH: I've always been ambivalent about what was possible in that period. On one level, the Transitional Program suggests that the crisis of mankind is a crisis of leadership. That strikes me as ahistorical. Whatever was wrong with class relations in the 1930s, the absence of leadership was not an explanation. The absence of leadership was a problem that had to be explained. It strikes me in retrospect as a fool's project. But what else do you do? I have no clear idea.

SL: Michael described Draper as a recovering sect addict. He was formed from his youth by the experience of Trotskyism. He was a pure product of that experience. Born in 1914, he was a member of the Socialist Party's youth group for a very short period of time before the French Turn. After that, he went with Shachtman, not Cannon. This experience influences his position in 1969 to 1973. The experience in the twentieth century is one of defeat. That defeat was not merely a matter of the absence of revolution, but of ongoing practices that blocked the way to it. Those included, but were not limited to, ideological practices. They also include organizational practices. It is the substance of Draper's critique that sectarianism was, or had become, a roadblock. The path of the micro-sect in 1973 is not merely misguided, but will block the way. What does he put in its place? The idea that capitalism still exists. Because capitalism still exists, history can, will, *must* repeat itself. He holds that the history of the nineteenth century will return, that we can repeat the process of forming the labor movement, the development of socialism, and the discovery of Marxism. That is why I identify Draper's ideas with those of the Frankfurt School on negative dialectics. He's attentive to the repetition, the regression, the eternal return of the same in capitalism. That is the aspect that I find to be most interesting.

Draper left the IS politely. He just stepped out. He neither published the document we are discussing nor publicly criticized the IS, which, of course, he played the central role in organizing. He just said, "I'm going to write about the history of Marxism for the rest of my life and I am not going to be subject to any organizational discipline, whether respecting demands on my time or issues of content." In writing about Marx, he's reflecting

"Beyond sect or movement" continues on page 4

"Beyond sect or movement", cont. from page 3

on a lifetime as a Left Shachtmanite Trotskyist.

I am not sure that Draper has any better idea than Michael or Jim or certainly I have about what should have been done in the 1930s, but he does know that twentieth century Marxism is spent. Very little came out of the New Left, so that there's nothing to build upon. There's only the question of capitalism's own (re) generation of discontent and, through that, the return of the question of socialism. That's the hardest pill for New Left interprets of Hal Draper to swallow. He's saying of the sixties, "this was largely middle class discontent, nothing came of it." That's the interest of the called for struggle groups, the ultra-leftism, however brief, within the IS in the early 1970s that Michael talked about. Draper doesn't have to anticipate economic crisis to see that "These New Left cadre that we've recruited are averse to socialism. They don't think the working class can do it." Which brings us back to Jim's question, What about when there is no wave? What about after Sanders (and we're already there)?

Thomas Paine went to France and helped write their constitution – the counter-point to a fascist system is a system based on the Constitution. Fascism is the aristocracy rules. The counterpoint is the rule of all.

Do you have a problem with what we fought World War II about? Freedom, freedom from want? You have a problem with the Four Freedoms? I mean there's the political center for you. Why reinvent the wheel?

SL: The wheel was reinvented a long time ago. Thomas Paine's politics, revered as it was in the history of the left, came up against its own limitations in the nineteenth century. The radicals, then the Chartists in Britain, both self-consciously espoused Paine. But, ultimately, the first working-class political movement for socialism would have not made sense to Thomas Paine, as the problem of capitalism is not one he faced. He was a bourgeois radical and had little idea of endemic unemployment or the other myriad symptoms of capitalist decay.

If we say that Paine represents a strain within the French Revolutionary tradition, he is part of the common inheritance of socialism, which in the nineteenth century proved inadequate. This is not to say that bourgeois radicalism could or should be jettisoned, but that it was necessary to recognize its self-contradiction. That was the lesson of Marx, what the revolution of 1848 meant to him: We cannot just re-fight the French Revolution and complete the conflict within the third estate between the propertyless and the propertied. That conflict can resolve itself in the bonapartist state, in a post-class capitalist state undergirded by mass democracy. So, the wheel was reinvented a long-time ago for very good reasons. Another way of putting is that, the emergence of socialism coincides with the emergence of capitalism. Thomas Paine has no developed concept of the Industrial Revolution and the problem that it created.

JC: I'm not sure what you mean by the eternal return of the same thing in capitalism. One thing that we can be sure of is that the class struggle, although it may have been placed on hold, or may not have been central to history for a long time, it's bound to resurface. The two main class actors of capitalist society — the working class and the capitalist class — are still bound to be the main contenders, although the composition of the working class has changed dramatically. It's reasonable to expect that at some point capitalism will again enter into crisis. So, class struggle doesn't go away.

About the reformism you have with this *Socialist Manifesto* by Bhaskar Sunkara of *Jacobin*: They are reformists, but with the difference that, unlike the reformists of the 60s and 70s who simply dismissed revolutionaries as wholly unrealistic, the people at *Jacobin* are very conscious of the revolutionary argument. For instance, if reforms go too far, the capitalists will begin moving capital out of the country or go on a capital strike or whatever. Or, even if the reforms are successful, the capitalist class is always there trying to take them back. They understand this and, therefore, they understand that reform has certain limits.

What they agree on is what I call the "Kautsky synthesis," that is the synthesis of Karl Kautsky in his *Road to Power*, in 1909. There he basically says that the working class is making a steady advance on the legislative and trade union fronts, and, if this advance continues then the bourgeoisie may panic and attack democracy, at which point the working class will have to respond by revolutionary means. What that amounted to is, basically, reform now and revolution (maybe) tomorrow. What the DSA, as represented by *Jacobin*, are saying, is, "for now, we can continue to work within the Democratic Party and canvass for left capitalist — left Democratic — politicians. At some future point, these reformist methods, this incremental approach, may cease to work." The trouble is, given the way capitalism is constituted today, those periods of incremental advance are very short-lived, if they are possible at all. The globalized capitalist class is well armed against these means. If they begin to lose, the response will be swift and annihilating. We have seen this with Mitterand in France, with SYRIZA in Greece, etc. So, incrementalism leading to revolution in the future might not work.

SL: The repetitious character of capitalism is rooted in Marx's understanding of the dialectic of capital itself. It can be seen in the very formula M-C-M`, the repetitious cycle that of course is disintegrative, because every time it repeats it's generating unemployment (even as it's generating employment), because even the very purchase of labor depends upon the elimination of necessity of the laborer. That's foreign to the notion of bourgeois society advanced by the likes Adam Smith or Thomas Paine, for whom the notion of unemployment as a fundamental feature of society would have been inconceivable. Politically, regression is seen when the discontent of society recreates revolutionary situations, at which point the ghosts of the past return. This why Marx loves to talk about ghosts and the undead. It is also why he will talk about the great, beating heart of the proletariat, because the defeats that haunt the present potentially contribute to and point towards the proletarian revolution. Thus, in *The 18th Brumaire of Louis-Bonaparte,* the image the myth of Antaeus, where Hercules's labor is to defeat the son of the Earth, the demon Anteeus, who every time he throws him to the ground, his mother regenerates his body. As he throws him to the Earth, the Earth recreates him in strength, and so he gets more and more formidable until circumstances themselves cry out "hic Rhodus, hic salta." That passage represents capitalist repetition. The image is not one of progress, of the dynamism of capital, which of course Marx is also very aware of. It's the static character of capital within its dynamism that is at the heart of Marxism. That's why, for Lenin, Luxemburg, and Trotsky, what's happening in 1905 and in 1917 is the return of 1848. Rosa Luxemburg says in 1919: "The *Communist Manifesto* is our program. We stand with Marx and Engels on the eve of 1848." That negativity is what was lost in the 20th century, that historical consciousness that connected the present to the revolutionary past. That, in turn, is because of the disorganization of parties who could have borne that historical consciousness. It's *that* dissolution of historical consciousness that transforms conditions from ones of mere capitalism, or mere ripeness for revolution, to what Trotsky calls "overripeness." It's the question of whether capitalism remains capitalism, without its own most fundamental characteristic, the struggle for socialism. For Marx, capitalism without the struggle for socialism is incomprehensible. It's socialism that makes capitalism comprehensible. It's what makes it itself, actually. It was the trade union struggle, the political struggle over the length of the working day, that creates the category of relative surplus value in *Capital*, that in a sense allows capital itself to be realized. In the absence of that, it's something worse than capitalist disintegration that we face. It's why the 20th century is, in a critical sense, worse than counterrevolution. Because counterrevolution was met by the Marxist tradition in in 1851, it was met in 1871, without the liquidation of the project of socialism. This is what Draper is realizing in 1973.

JC: You think that the project for socialism had been liquidated completely by 1973?

SL: In a sense it was liquidated in 1923. Certainly at some point, for Draper, "this whole strategy of ringing the changes on entryism, splitting, and so forth — this is not going to work." He doesn't know what is going to work, but essentially what's good about him is the confession of agnosticism.

What's most striking about the present is that the Soviet survived two massive counterrevolutionary attacks, during the Civil War, then in a bigger form during World War II, only to collapse from its internal disintegration quite peacefully.

JC: With some pressure coming from the West.

But the pressure was nothing compared to what it had previously endured. So, really, the internal decay was what did it in. The other question I had is, people talk about the micro-sect, but isn't there a possibility for a macro-sect?

MH: If there's one thing the Left has to do, above all the other many things that the Left has to do, it is class unity. Everything in capitalism suggests division. The function of the Left is to move a class in-itself to a class for-itself. Some people say that's volunteerism. But that's also politics. When we don't have a sense of how to do that, we are just individuals and only episodically collective. We believe not just that we are fundamentally collective, but that point has to be underscored again and again. It's what we tried to do in the industry. That there are now a smaller number of industrial workers, working plants, where people can talk together and begin to have a common identity, that means that our work is that much more difficult.

SL: The political testament of Hal Draper is, If Marxism is not about class independence, it is not about anything. That's the one thing he's certain of. That's what motivates his rank-and-file orientation, even though he himself doesn't carry that through. Perhaps, the IS did that alongside other sectarian organizations in the 1970s. But when the struggle to overcome the crisis of socialism fails, there's simply nothing to analyze.

JC: Do you think that was the case in the 60s?

SL: Were the 1960s and 70s a time when socialism was possible or not? Or at least the constitution of political parties that could lead to socialism? How can we say?

JC: But certainly we can specify some differences between the 30s and 40s and the 60s. My father was a union organizer for the Communist Party. His experience of socialism was a proletarian experience. I was on the cutting edge of the 60s. Born in 1947, a participant in SDS, in the student rebellion, my experience was not a proletarian experience. I don't think we realized what the New Left in the 1960s essentially was. It was a middle-class phenomenon, which may explain Draper's increasing discomfort. Draper had a basic discomfort with the New Left based on his proletarian socialism. The radical roots of the 1960s had some connection to the working class, but it was not a working class movement.

SL: Yet, the task of Marxism haunts even the DSA. Why do they need to publish articles about Marx and Lenin, when all they want to do is simply to be reformist liberals? Why do they need, in a sense, need to jack themselves up on Marxism in order take up the fight for $15 per hour?

JC: Because they want to be Marxists in some sense. | **P**

Transcribed by Ciat Conlin, Stephanie Gomez, Erin Hagood, and Sam Johnson.

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1 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/draper/1973/xx/microsect.htm>
2 Letter from Marx to Ruge, published in the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher* in 1844. Available at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/letters/43_09-alt.htm>.
3 See, inter alia, Hal Draper, "Marxism and the Trade Unions," a series of lectures delivered in 1970 now available online at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/draper/1970/tus/>.
4 Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, Third Edition (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008 [1942]), 317.
5 Alexander Burns and Jonathan Martin, "Liberals Ruled the Debates, and the Moderates Are Anxious" *New York Times* (June 30, 2019).
6 Bhaskar Sunkara, *The Socialist Manifesto: The Case for Radical Politics in an Era of Extreme Inequality* (New York: Basic Books, 2019), 2.
7 Reorient Tendency series, Hal Draper Papers (D-373), University of California at Davis, Box 12, Folder 18.

What was Stalinism in power?

Rory Hannigan

The following remarks were given at the Communist Party of Great Britain's Communist University on August 22nd, 2019.

2019 MARKS 30 YEARS since the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the beginning of the unravelling of the Soviet Union, and the ejection from political power of Stalinist parties in the Eastern bloc. For those on the Left at the time, it was perceived variously as a traumatic disaster, or as a partial and temporary setback, or as an opportunity, and even a cause for rejoicing. Writing in the newspaper of the UK Militant Tendency in January 1990, Peter Taaffe described the uprisings and unrest taking place in Eastern Europe as a vindication of Trotsky's hopes for a political revolution against the Stalinist bureaucracy, heralding the onset of what he described — for a brief period, admittedly — as the "red 90s." At about the same time, writing in *The Leninist*, a less sanguine but nonetheless hopeful Jack Conrad identified the crack-up of the Soviet bloc as a "pro-capitalist reaction" and a counterrevolutionary setback, while nevertheless looking forward to a time when such reaction "inevitably gives way to a new period of revolution." And for others, of course, the USSR, as a supposed example of "actually-existing socialism" in practice, had — perhaps like the elevated prominence of Sanders and Corbyn today — done something akin to pushing the so-called Overton window to the Left, providing an important counterweight to right-wing hegemony, with its demise therefore having been a tragic disaster.

Interestingly, the terms of these initial Left responses to the end of Stalinism in power have been followed in a somewhat similar pattern ever since, even while the social phenomenon of the Soviet Union has disappeared in the chronological rearview mirror. Speaking on a recent Platypus panel marking the 50th anniversary of 1968, Hillel Ticktin argued emphatically that there was always, historically, clear red water between the Left and Stalinism — that, having "destroyed the revolution" in 1923-1927, Stalinism was "nothing to do with the Left" and nothing to "beat ourselves up about." Ticktin critiqued Trotsky for having the notion that the problem of Stalinism "did not go the whole way back" — that there was anything potentially redeemable lingering within Stalinism or the Soviet Union. For Ticktin, the effects of the Stalinist counterrevolution have in some respects lessened with its disappearance as a major political force, giving certain grounds for optimism for the Left today.

Conversely, we are also faced today with what the Alliance for Workers' Liberty has called the "New Stalinism" — the taking up of Stalinist iconography and ideology amongst a number of predominantly young Left activists. While this can seem merely like a collection of semi-ironic, pseudo-nostalgic affectations for a distant past, "Marxism-Leninism" and "Maoism" is nonetheless intoned with a degree of seriousness, and more importantly is often used as an ideological justification for, for instance, communitarian activism, and what has been described as "base-building."

In passing, it is worth noting the strange historical irony of a veteran Leftist like Ticktin's thorough rejection of Stalinism coexisting with the attempts of young Leftists, likely not even born before 1989, to embrace it — clearly the problem represented by Stalinism has not straightforwardly faded away with the passing of time, but has periodically returned on the Left, albeit in weaker and more degraded forms. Indeed, given the persistence of this variety of Left responses to Stalinism in the face of the seeming absurdity of insisting on a political line today towards a social entity that no longer exists — the USSR — Stalinism would seem to present a deeper problem than one of merely having the correct "line" on, for instance, the class nature of the Soviet Union.

This confusion, taken as a whole, can perhaps be used as an opportunity for reflection on the question of Stalinism, as an ideology and a political force, and in particular its historical relationship to the Left and to Marxism. This is something Platypus has been attempting over the course of a reading group this summer entitled "30 Years of 1989: What Was Stalinism in Power?" The "ending of the Stalinist ice age" in 1989, as one Leftist recently described it to me, metaphorically brings to mind the Khrushchev Thaw of the mid-1950s and the international crisis of Stalinism, both within and between the Stalinist regimes and on the Western Left. Similarly to 1989, for many Leftists, de-Stalinisation appeared as a traumatic crisis as well as an opportunity — unlike in 1989, however, it opened the door to the formation of a "New Left" in the West, which at its best attempted to reckon with and overcome the debilitating legacy of Stalinism.

As a way of framing this historical moment, the bulk of our summer reading group has been given over to contemporary journalistic and political pieces by Isaac Deutscher, from the period of the 1950s up to his death in 1967. Deutscher cut his teeth politically as a Left oppositionist within the Polish Communist Party in the early 1930s, nonetheless rejecting Trotsky's call for the formation of a Fourth International in 1938 as hopeless and premature, opting instead to remain on the political sidelines as a journalist and academic, rather than participating as a revolutionary organizer. Nonetheless, Deutscher's appraisal of Stalinism and the Soviet Union owed a great deal to Trotsky's critique in *The Revolution Betrayed*, and in a sense his political inactivity allowed him access to certain insights which were denied or repressed by the organizational commitments of post-Trotsky Trotskyists. Crucially, Deutscher sought to maintain a dialectical approach to Stalinism, as simultaneously both a counterrevolutionary and a revolutionary phenomenon.

For Trotsky, the Stalinist counterrevolution was not to be understood merely as the flat negation or undoing of the October Revolution. Rather, the revolution continued within the counterrevolution, even in spite of the obvious brutality of social life in the USSR, and the distortions and vulgarizations of Marxism perpetrated by the Stalinist ideologues. Stalinism as the — dialectical — antithesis of Bolshevism nevertheless preserved and was conditioned by the historical memory of the October Revolution, even and especially where it seemed to violate it most egregiously. The profound unreality built into the bureaucracy's understanding of the society it attempted to govern perversely reflected a deeper reality — that the dialectical self-understanding of the Bolshevik party as non-identical and indeed in a contradictory relationship with the state, the working class, and the masses in the revolution, had broken down in the face of an acquiescence to and rationalization of the failure of the world revolution. The doctrine of "socialism in one country" was the effect, not the cause, of this acquiescence. Stalinism attempted to subsume these acute contradictions of Soviet society into a monolithic conception of socialism, but could only maintain this ideologically through terror and violence, targeting both the supposed remaining "alien class elements" in the Soviet Union and, increasingly, seeking out and punishing the supposed "subjective" psychological treachery of the party members themselves.

Crucially, for Trotsky, the question of understanding what the Soviet Union *was* could not be understood in isolation from the question of *where it was going* and how to politically intervene in such change, as the subtitle of his book implies and as he explicitly spelt out in the dispute with Burnham and Shachtman in the late 1930s over the nature of the Stalinist regime. The fact that the Soviet Union was a regime of crisis management, in which its official ideology and its social reality were in acute contradiction, in fact pointed to possibilities for revolution bubbling under the surface. This is why it is important to emphasize Trotsky's approach to Stalinism as one of immanent dialectical critique, with such acute contradictions within the phenomenal appearances of Stalinism pointing to unrealized potential and possibilities beyond themselves.

Of course, the Stalinist bureaucracy was not met by a wave of revolution in the aftermath of the Second World War, but survived and was able to consolidate and even expand itself and its global prestige in the 1940s and 1950s. Given Trotsky's emphasis on the interrelation of the theoretical understanding of the Soviet Union and the grasping of political possibilities for actually changing it, this obviously threw the validity of Trotsky's critique into question, presenting a conundrum for his followers in the 40s and 50s, whose analyses and prognoses tended to degrade and disintegrate into antinomical, one-sided poles of Stalinophobia and Stalinophilia, to borrow the language of the Spartacist League.

Through this lens, Deutscher's appraisal of the reality and possibilities of Stalinism seems closer to a Stalinophilic understanding — he held out the possibility that Stalinism in both the East and the West might be reformable, especially in the wake of the Khrushchev Thaw and de-Stalinisation. However, this needs to be treated carefully, as Deutscher remained a fierce critic of the Stalinist bureaucracies and retained his sympathy for Trotsky. It is not the case that Deutscher was hoodwinked by, for instance, the apparent liberalization and increased living standards within the Soviet Union, or that he thought that Stalinism would progress in a linear manner in the direction of socialism. Rather, following Trotsky, Deutscher saw Khrushchev's Secret Speech, for example, as expressing and further provoking a crisis within Stalinism, demonstrating its limits and potentially pointing to changes beyond them. In this admittedly weakened, ideological sense, Deutscher, like some of the better surviving elements of the Trotskyist tradition at the time, as well as (perhaps more contentiously) the Frankfurt School, attempted to preserve something of the original Marxist point of departure — the dialectical critique of capitalist modernity, to which Stalinism remained subject.

The final few years of his life might be seen as Deutscher's attempt to pass on this critical tradition of Marxism to the New Left, particularly to the student activists who sought him out for his insights. It is more of a reflection on the New Left than on Deutscher himself that, in their interactions, Deutscher — for instance in his 1967 interview on "Marxism and the New Left" — can appear as something of a scold. Reading his words, one senses Deutscher's frustration and disappointment with his purported followers' inability to grasp the older problems and difficulties he, as a veteran of the 1930s "Old Left," was so intimately familiar. Furthermore, Deutscher's hopes for a transformation beyond Stalinism were posthumously vanquished, and the crisis of Stalinism, to which the New Left had attempted to respond, gave way to decline and eventual decrepitude and collapse in the 1970s and 1980s. Not coincidentally, the New Left itself regressed and fell apart along a similar timeline to its Stalinist object of critique.

That Stalinism nevertheless remains a deeply-ingrained and recurrent phenomenon on the Left would seem to suggest that the world-historical problems and contradictions unleashed by the October Revolution, and by extension by the entire history of capitalism in the Industrial Revolution, still remain with us and trouble us today — and this might be cause for hope. However, whereas for Trotsky, Deutscher, and even, to a very attenuated degree, the New Left, these problems still registered as a historical task passed down from generation to generation, to be taken up and transformed in the face of new historical conditions and problems, the post-1968 world has further naturalized and obscured this inheritance. In a way, the stakes seem to have lowered, and not just as a result of the political absence of the old Stalinist parties and the Soviet bloc. Stalinism remains something the Left finds important to consider, but it is not clear whether these considerations and arguments can be turned into productive, living political questions. This is what it means to say that the Left has regressed and died in the 20th Century. And this state of affairs is what Platypus tasks itself with intervening in and bringing to critical recognition. | **P**

Hong Kong's dialectic between spontaneity and organization

Kai Yui Samuel Chan

SHOULD SOCIAL MOVEMENTS BE ORGANIZED in a horizontal, spontaneous, and decentralized manner so that every member can equally participate? Or should movements be structured hierarchically with clear leadership so that they can act decisively in response to changing circumstances? The debate between spontaneity and organization is an old one, so old that one could trace it at least back to the debate between Rosa Luxemburg and Vladimir Lenin. In recent years, the debate has tilted in favor of organization. Prominent scholars on the Left such as Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, and Lea Ypi insisted on the need for hierarchical leadership and structure. Decentralized movements are said to exhibit multiple grave defects: they are incapable of distributing commitment among their members, of reacting swiftly during moments of decision, and of converging on unified and concrete political demands. These defects are said to account for the failure of recent horizontal movements such as Occupy Wall Street and Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement; France's *gilets jaunes*, whatever its other merits, remains somewhat vulnerable to these weaknesses.[1] Hong Kong's recent wave of summer protests against its government's proposed extradition bill amendment, however, tells a somewhat different story.

Admittedly, this movement began as a protest against an amendment bill that allows the Hong Kong government to accept extradition requests by Beijing, and as such constituted a defence of the city's bourgeoise legal order and values; there was nothing particularly socialist about it. Hong Kong's socialists occupied a somewhat awkward position in the movement: while the local socialists had great sympathies for the movement, they found it difficult to square with the localist, xenophobic, and right-wing sentiments of many of the protestors;[2] likewise, many protestors denounced the local Left, seeing them as either focusing on the wrong issues or as impotent of producing concrete changes in Hong Kong. To complicate matters, Hong Kong protestors have sought an alliance with the G20, waved the British and American Flags, and asked Trump to "liberate Hong Kong." These acts have reasonably made both the local and the international Left uneasy; to them, these practices reek of postcolonial nostalgia.

Yet the movement should be of concern to the Left, and not only in order to steer the city's democratic activists away from dubious allies such as Donald Trump, Marco Rubio, and Ted Cruz.[3] A careful study of Hong Kong's unfolding events offers crucial insights to the global Left, of which I will discuss two. The first is that Hong Kong activists' insistence and success in their spontaneous movement direct us to look at their historical conditions—the emergence of the surveillance state, the protestors' memories of past struggles, and the revolutionary moment that shot through the city's static temporality. Contrary to scholars and activists who have tried to settle the debate between spontaneity and organization with universal answers, Hong Kong's movement helps us appreciate that any answer to this debate has to be historically conditioned. The second insight concerns the role of the Left. The Left has been understandably wary of attending to struggles that are not socialist in their outlook, but this fear overlooks the fact that, as I shall show with Hong Kong's movement, struggles that are ostensibly non-socialist could, in fact, reflect democratic discontents and develop emancipatory potentials that could have been articulated and clarified into socialist ones. As the early Marx would have reminded us, "we only show the world what it is fighting for, and consciousness is something that the world *must* acquire, like it or not."[4]

A few words about the decentralized appearance of Hong Kong's anti-extradition protests. The movement has no institutionalized discussion or voting procedure, no formal coordinating mechanism, and no leading person or organization vested with any additional authority. In fact, due to having to conceal themselves behind masks, goggles, and aliases, most protestors know neither the face nor name of their "partners in crime." This decentralized structure is not the product of abstract theoretical speculation or idealized deliberation, but a practical response to the surveillance and repression technologies of the state. After the city's Umbrella Movement in 2014 and Mong Kok incident in 2016, the leaders of those movements were convicted of incitement, and many protestors landed themselves in jail after having their identities exposed either on site or on social media. The heavy hand of the state, along with its surveillance technologies, had severely shrunk the space for contestation. Decentralization, spontaneity, and anonymity were taken up as practical strategies of resistance that reopen up this space.

What is remarkable is that the movement, despite being highly decentralized and spontaneous, has so far avoided the above-mentioned defects of horizontalism, to the extent that state officials continue to suspect that there must be some leadership hidden somewhere. Despite its continuous transformation, the movement has retained a consensus over its demands: from the withdrawal of the extradition bill to the now five-fold demands of withdrawal of the bill, a retraction of any characterization of the movement as a "riot," a retraction of all charges against anti-extradition protestors, an independent investigative committee into police abuses, and universal suffrage immediately. Furthermore, the movement has deployed every imaginable and unimaginable tactic: mass demonstrating, rallying, occupying key political sites, subverting public spaces (such as their Lennon walls), adopting guerrilla strategies, striking, boycotting, petitioning, doxing, picketing, holding civilian press conferences, appealing to foreign governments, media, and international organizations and so forth. Yet despite such a plethora of strategies, these strategies coordinated with and built upon each other to maximize their impact. The scene on confrontational sites is even more remarkable: observers reported a "well-developed system" for replenishing, safekeeping, and moving supplies, providing aid, scouting for police movements, communicating messages, and constructing barricades among the protestors that enabled them to act instantly against police clearances.[5] Many reporters have attributed this success to the movement's technological infrastructure: ideas are crowdsourced on anonymous discussion forums; strategies are discussed on secretive apps such as Telegram and Firechat; Airdrop is used both for instant updates but also for influencing commuters and passersby. Technological advances might have facilitated surveillance and repression, but they have also enabled new forms of resistance previously unavailable to activists. At the same time, however, we must resist the temptation to fetishize technological tools, as the tools themselves cannot determine their function, nor do technological conditions exhaust our historical conditions; we must look at the city's broader history.

For Hong Kong protestors, the history of their city since its handover to China in 1997 is one of loss, and the history of their struggles is one of repeated failures and frustrations: housing prices and costs of living have surged, cultural and political values eroded, and universal suffrage denied. Resistance seems futile. The Umbrella Movement of 2014, a mass-scale, 79-day peaceful occupation of the Central Business District demanding universal suffrage, yielded no substantial reforms. The movement's failure bred hostile feelings among some protestors against both leadership and moderate movement strategies. These feelings culminated in a struggle against police clearance of local hawkers in 2016, in which localist activists took up more aggressive means against police officers. Not only were many of them prosecuted and convicted with lengthy sentences afterwards, but their approach offended other "peace-loving" democratic activists in Hong Kong, and the rift between the two camps of activists widened. From then on, Hong Kong's democratic movement stagnated: from 2014 onwards, there was not a single mass movement that succeeded in yielding any concession from the government.

It is this historical background that protestors had in mind when the anti-extradition protests unfolded in June. They understood full well that the radical plurality of protestors implies that there cannot be a leadership that represents them all, nor is leadership viable under a regime of surveillance and repression; however, they also recognize that factionalization is the biggest hurdle they have to leap through. Thus, one of the most prominent slogans in the movement is "No Blood, No Injuries, No Arrests; No Divisions, No Betrayal, No Blame." Protestors made sure that they would not undermine but would instead build upon the strategies of other protestors. Additionally, they made extra efforts to understand alternative strategies, and even when disagreement persisted, they would not withdraw their support for those they disagreed with.

The frustration of previous movements, coupled with the absence of leaders, also enabled a blossoming of the most diverse ideas. Because no strategy worked before, new and creative strategies have to be thought out and experimented; because no strategy could claim certainty of success, no idea can be dismissed out of hand; because there is no leader, the burden is on every single person to think and contribute. Nobody could afford to be a blind follower. Such enhanced sense of agency is what Hannah Arendt attributes to the direct and intense participation in revolutionary times.[6] Protestors, however, do not weave ideas out from thin air: many strategies of occupation and of confrontation can be traced back to the Umbrella Movement and the Mong Kok incident; many symbols, slogans, and images were passed down and have taken a new life; many lessons were explicitly taken from international movements such as Taiwan's Sunflower Movement, Ukraine's Revolution of Dignity, France's *gilets jaunes*, and various black bloc protests.

All of this confirms Luxemburg's thesis that the mass learns from praxis. The mass learns not only strategic but also theoretical lessons, as Hong Kong's democratic movement demonstrates in two ways. The first lesson is that of governmentality. While the protest began as a defense of the existing legal order and values, protestors quickly learned in the process of resistance how various apparatuses of governance — the police force, surveillance cameras, new ID cards, or even the organization of urban space — have suffocated their space for contestation. New strategies were developed to overcome these mechanisms of control, and the protest itself has turned to focus on these apparatuses rather than the amendment bill itself. The second regards the line between economic and political struggles. As Luxemburg illustrates in *The Mass Strike* through the Russian strikes, economic and political struggles are but two phases that flow into each other as history progresses. Likewise, in Hong Kong, what began as a political movement took on an economic dimension: protestors realized that strikes, boycotts, and divestments are significant means of contestation and started to inquire after the material and organizational conditions for these tactics; that most corporations are in essence allies of the authoritarian regime, and measures have to be taken to either pressurize them or empower more local and cooperative businesses. Most importantly, the movement denaturalized the capitalist imagery of the person: people need not be self-interested but can cooperate without codified rules and contracts. New, yet inchoate, social possibilities are opened up.

The mass could learn and progress *theoretically* because they have the will to do so, and this will is historically conditioned: their memories of past losses and failures motivated them to understand the milieu they are situated in; the revolutionary sentiments gave them the passions and bravery to break through old norms; the decentralized structure of the movement empowered them with agency to think as equal intellectual partners with their fellow comrades. The picture, however, would be incomplete if I leave political emotions and identity politics unmentioned. The government's utter disregard of the protestors' demands, along with escalating police abuse, have left protestors angry, frustrated, and often in shock and fear. These emotions have proven to be double-edged swords, both mobilizing yet also devastating, pushing many to the verge of collapse, six of whom already committed suicide for the cause. On the other hand, the selflessness and creativity of protestors filled everyone with amazement, excitement, pride, and affection. Among these emotions, the most important has to be a sense of identity-based solidarity: Hong Kongers must stand together in the face of crisis. Socialists have always been skeptical about identity-based politics, especially those with a nationalist overtone, and often with good reasons. Undoubtedly, many sexist and xenophobic elements went into the construction of the Hong Konger identity; it has often been constructed and maintained in opposition to the "other" — mostly Mainland Chinese and sometimes other ethnic minorities. But identity gets recreated through praxis, and it need not remain conservative or even exclusive. Over the past two months, gender stereotypes are debunked as females were seen to play aggressive and leadership roles in the movement; protestors started seeing all participating South Asians as fellow Hong Kongers and urged each other to drop all negative labels employed against them; they identified themselves even as allies of other oppressed regions in China such as Xinjiang and Wuhan.

Yet even if the mass has the will to learn, its learning process is bound to be messy and its direction undetermined, and thus its complex appearance and uncomfortable elements. The Left should not seek to lead the movement, nor is it capable of doing so — this movement, like many others, defies any attempt at leadership — yet the Left cannot afford to leave it alone either. Instead, the Left must play the role of what Michael Walzer calls the "connected critic"[7] — it must continue to articulate ideals and make criticisms but with vocabularies internal to local practices and culture. People on the ground will not be mobilized by scientific claims, dry analyses, and lofty ideals unless they feel that these are *their* values and ideals. This does not mean that the Left should simply go with the flow; rather, the Left must pay close attention to the history, discourses, and understandings of the people who fight against oppression and look at the emancipatory potentials that emerge as struggles unfold. Hong Kong's democratic activists might have appealed to the G20, but they also allied themselves with the J20 Resistance. Taiwan's Taoyuan Flight Attendants Union had set an example of international solidarity by donating resources to Hong Kong's frontlines and supporting its mass strike. Could the Left show Hong Kong that a socialist international coalition will be the more reliable and effective one? Hong Kong activists are now looking with keen eyes towards the introduction of the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act in the U.S. Again, could the American Left articulate Hong Kong's discontents and potentials by supporting yet making their amendments to the Act? Luxemburg argues that "the masses will be the actual chorus." If the Left wants to interpret the melody, it must first sing along. **| P**

Since March 2019, millions of Hong Kongers have been in the streets protesting the highly controversial Extradition Bill.

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4 Karl Marx, *For a Ruthless Criticism of Everything Existing*. 1843

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6 Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*. (London: Penguin Books, 1963).

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